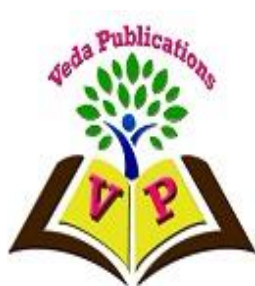




## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**ROBERT FROST AS A NATURE POET : AN ECOCRITICAL VIEW**

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*Lecturer, College of Sciences and Arts Al-Namas, University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia*DOI: <http://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9406>**ABSTRACT**

Robert Frost is arguably the greatest American poet of 20<sup>th</sup> Century and if there is any truth to Emerson's maxim "to be great is to be misunderstood," then definitely Robert Frost is great as he is one of the most misunderstood poets. Critics have hotly debated whether or not he is a Nature-poet. This paper intends to examine the claim of Frost being a Nature-poet with an ecocritical perspective. We will review *The Tuft of Flowers* to understand whether or not he can be called Nature-poet. Humans have been writing poems about Nature for centuries and Frost has also described hills, mountains, valleys, rivers, forests, woods, flowers, animals, seasons, and seasonal changes in his poems in a beautiful way, but does description of flora and fauna in the poem makes the poet a Nature-poet has been studied in this paper.

**Keywords:** *Ecocriticism, Ecology, Nature, Cultural ecology, Rober Frost.*



## INTRODUCTION

Frost grew up in an age when the most distinguished literature seemed to follow Emerson in reverse – “to be misunderstood is to be great.” (Faggen, 2001, p. 1) A time when artists were making all sorts of trials in all the form of art that was later called modern period characterized by complexities and intricacies. A time when artists were filled with the zeal to “make it new” Writers broke the conventional rules of storytelling and poets experimented with irregular verse-forms, fragmentary verses, complex illusions and references, ironic contrasts, and erudite and abstruse symbolism. Contrary to his contemporaries, Frost strictly adhered to rhyme, meter and formalized stanzas, the features that have been core of English poetry since its inception. And though he was dismissed as “un-modern” for his observance to rules Forst powerfully demonstrated he was very modern in his attitude. His poetry expresses the pain and sensibility of modern life. He portrayed the modern life filled with alienation, frustration, loneliness, isolation and disillusionment.

## ECOCRITISM

Ecocritism, also known as environmental literary criticism, green studies, and ecopoetics. The term ‘Ecocriticism’ was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay to analyze literary texts that notices “something about the ecology of literature.” However, it was in mid-1990s the word gained momentum after the publication of the book *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. According to Barry, Glotfelty defined ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical

environment” (Barry, 2020, p. 239). He further tells that ecocritics “re-read major works from an ecocritic point of view and extend the application of ideas to areas other than the natural world” (Barry, 2020, p. 254). Ecocritics look into a literary text and raises various environmental concerns, its representation, role it plays, values expressed and most importantly how Nature and the natural world are imagined in the text. Ecocritics believes that such study of literature can raise awareness in the society and inspire people take action against ecological change and the devastation of natural habitats. With such strong ethical aspect ecocritics hope to make readers realize how human beings use Nature for their own ends.

## ROBERT FROST'S TREATMENT OF NATURE: TRADITIONAL VIEW

Undoubtedly, Frost is a great Nature lover and his poems are abundantly filled with Nature imagery, natural scenes and sounds. His panoramic world contains everything rivers, woods, flowers, plants, valleys and mountains, animals and birds, seasons and days and nights. His vivid descriptions of Nature are precise and energetic. However, critics are divided over the issue to include or not Frost as a poet of Nature. Critics like Alvarez say that, Frost cannot be regarded as Nature poet as his poetry isn't about Nature but are of country life. He considers him as a pastoral poet who describes the life of humble dwellers in the countryside with their work. Critics have argued that the pictures of Nature that Frost uses in his poetry form the background of his poetry. The centerstage of his poems are always humans. And this view is strengthened by Frost himself, in a television interview in 1952 he said, “I



guess I am not a Nature-poet. I have written only two poems without a human being in them." On the other hand, there are equally acclaimed critics like Jhon F. Lynen who thinks that Nature is so abundantly present in his poems "that one can hardly avoid thinking of him as a Nature-poet." Lynen emphasizes that, "Frost's Nature poetry is so excellent and so characteristic that must be given a prominent place in any account of his art." Marion Montgomery in his essay addresses this confusion and clarifies that Frost is a Nature poet but not in the tradition of Wordsworth. He writes, "In a sense, Nature is his subject, but to Frost it is never an impulse from a vernal wood. His best poetry is concerned with the drama of man in Nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world."

Frost's handling of Nature is different from that of nineteenth century poets. His attitude, response and tone are subtle and realistic presented honestly and sans sentimentality. He doesn't paint a rosy picture but involve himself in Nature and sometimes even is in conflict with Nature. John F. Lynen says, "Even in Frost's most cheerful sketches there is always a bitter-sweet quality". Frost recognizes man's limitations and insists upon the boundaries that man must maintain with the forces of Nature.

#### **ROBERT FROST'S TREATMENT OF NATURE: ECOCRITICAL VIEW**

Frost's poems both offer and resist a straightforward ecological interpretation. His writing is fashioned not by spectacular novelty but by a more old-style, almost classicist sense of versification. Frost's poems are molded by imaginative processes

that form a robust undercurrent of ecocultural reading. Describing the possibilities and restrictions of human self-determination, Frost's poetry suggests recognition of man's life in Nature and of the necessities of human existence within a life-sustaining environment. His writings point that though humans have a distinct place in ecological settings yet at the same time have connections with larger evolutionary and cosmic references. His poems are filled with all elements of Nature and their association with human civilization. This relationship between human and non-human Nature appears in his poetry as an interactional field, a point of contact, tension, and struggle, a necessary place of human self-definition. Stars, the moon, day and night, clouds, snow and rain, the seasons, woods, trees, brooks, fruits, flowers, birds, ants, snakes, spiders, hornets, butterflies, and more, appear with remarkable frequency and variation in his poems. They do not just form a mirror or milieu to human interests but are also part of a shared world, manifestations of an all-powerful natural presence that is significantly interrelated with human life even though it can never fully be confined within its categories. He presents natural phenomena and creatures as metaphors and symbols for human actions, emotions and passion at the same time human beings are defined through their kinship to natural processes. Creatures, irrespective of their size and significance doesn't appear as anything inferior but often as alter egos of the persona whose behavior, feeling, or even thinking show clear analogies to human experience to the extent that the boundaries between human and nonhuman



creatures if not fully abolished, is significantly blurred.

Non-human life, however, is not idealized in Frost's poetry but recognized in all its ambivalence between beauty and cruelty, creative and destructive forces. Robert Faggen has noted the considerable influence of Darwin and the theory of evolution on Frost's poetics, in which cultural and natural history are indissolubly intertwined and in which the world, as well as the living organisms trying to survive within it, are presented in a process of constant adaptation and change. Frost's poems convey, as Faggen observes, "the romantic sense of change but stripped of endless possibility" (Faggen, 1997, p. 8). Change is real and irreversible; it is the change of evolutionary struggle but also of seasonal and generational cycles, an ongoing process of recurrence, variation, and transmutation. Established hierarchies are questioned, and "the small, the minute, and the lowly are revealed to have great power" in the evolutionary process—and in the poetic world of Frost (Faggen, 1997, p. 12).

In the poem *The Tuft of Flowers* this creative process of linking man and ecology appears significantly. The poem narrates an incident in the life of the speaker when he goes to empty field where the grass has been mown, in the morning dew, before sunrise. When he reaches there, he cannot find the mower and is filled with loneliness. In this negative state, the speaker makes a sweeping generalization about the fundamental condition of human existence which according to him, is to be without a company.

*And I must be, as he had been — alone,  
'As all must be,' I said within my heart,  
'Whether they work together or apart.'*

And just as the speaker reaches this disillusioning conclusion a butterfly passes him searching for the lost flowers like the speaker before had searched for the vanished mower. The butterfly, personified and humanized by the use of the personal pronoun 'he', draws the speaker's attention to the lively sphere of the natural world, the drama in miniature of loss, crisis, suffering, search, and disorientation through which the butterfly must go because of the utilitarian human intervention in and cultivation of the nonhuman world. The butterfly captivates the poet's attention by his unusual, irregular, desperately circular movements through the air.

Just as the speaker wants to "turn" back to his work discarding the butterfly's futile search

*I thought of questions that have no reply,  
And would have turned to toss the grass to  
dry;*

the butterfly himself makes another unexpected "turn," leading the speaker's eye once more away from his intended work to a tuft of flowers by a brook side spared by the scythe of the mower.

This completes the circle of ecology in which all, the speaker, the mower, the butterfly and the tuft flower, are interconnected. Frost makes the point that though everything and everyone is apparently apart, in reality we are intertwined with each other in the grand scheme of things.

*'Men work together.' I told him from the  
heart,  
'Whether they work together or apart.'*



The visible companionship of the butterfly evokes the speaker's invisible companionship with the early morning mower. Unlike Frost's other poems which are filled with loneliness, this poem talks about the unity between men. The renewed relationship of culture to Nature becomes an inspiration for the renewal of the relationship of human beings to each other. The deeper awareness of and restored relationship to nonhuman life within the text helps to expand and redefine the understanding of human life as well.

### CONCLUSION

The poem shows once more how the function of literature as cultural ecology is inherently tied up with the question of poetic creativity. For Robert Frost, as for cultural ecologists, this connection was expressed in his theory of metaphor. He saw metaphor as the central poetic activity, which, in a mutable world without firm ground, can itself only be put to temporary use. This constantly shifting process of metaphor-making and unmaking is precisely what brings poetry closer to life, because metaphors are a way of interrelating in ever new ways what remains separated in conceptual knowledge—ideas and emotions, intellect and instinct, mind and matter, the human brain and the natural world.

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